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A HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF MOBILE

Wong
April 18, 1916

BY
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Mobile, Ala.

Reprinted from THE PUBLICATIONS OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH
HISTORICAL SOCIETY, No. 12.

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The Lord Baltimore Press
THE FRIEDENWALD COMPANY
BALTIMORE, MD., U. S. A.

Ms. 1.10. 1920-10-19

A HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF MOBILE.

BY REV. ALFRED G. MOSES, *Mobile, Ala.*

The researches which I have made thus far into the history of the Jews of the Gulf States deal with the history of the Jews of Mobile. This portion of my work was written after a careful and thorough overhauling of all available sources, and has been presented in another form to the Iberville Historical Society of Mobile and to the State Department of Alabama History, both of which have co-operated in these studies. Such parts as may be hereafter written will be presented to your society. In addition to separate local and State histories, I propose to write a new biography of Judah P. Benjamin. I shall be grateful to any member of the Society who can furnish me information on the subject of Mr. Benjamin's life.

The history of the Jews of Mobile can be divided into two parts or periods. The first may be called the preorganization and the second the organization period. The first period is the history of individual Jews who sojourned or settled in Mobile but who made no effort to organize a Jewish congregation either from indifference or lack of numbers. The second period commences with the organization of a distinct Jewish congregation and the beginnings of Jewish life, religious and social.

The first period in the Jewish history of Mobile extends through several decades after the territory came into the possession of the United States. From the year 1724 when the first reference is found to Jews in Mobile and Louisiana till the year 1841, when the Jewish congregation was organized, the history of the Mobile Jews is largely a history of individuals. In order to discover the traces of Jews during the colonial and early federal periods I made a careful

examination of all the sources according to the various epochs in the general history of the city.

Mobile was settled in 1701 by the French under Le Moyne de Bienville and Le Moyne d'Iberville and made the first capital of Louisiana. The principal source of the Colony's early history is the record of births, christenings, marriages and burials which was kept by the priests of the Mobile diocese from 1701 till 1813. However, no data bearing on my subject could be found in these records. The first distinct reference to Jews in the Louisiana colony in which Mobile was included is found in the "Black Code of Louisiana," issued in 1724 by Bienville, the governor of the colony from New Orleans, its capital at that time. The Code is reprinted in full in Gayarre's "History of Louisiana."¹ The first two articles of the code read as follows: "Article I: Decrees the expulsion of the Jews from the colony. Article II: Permits the exercise of the Roman Catholic worship only. Every other code of worship is prohibited." Strange to say, the rest of the code deals with laws regulating the sale and conduct of negro slaves. Gayarre finds the reference to the Jews irrelevant to the general subject-matter of the code. My own explanation of the anti-Jewish laws, which is supported by a good authority, is that they were merely a repetition of the similar legislation current in France at the time of Louis XIV.² Drastic as the law appears, it was probably never enforced, because there are no further references to it in Louisiana records. The expulsion of the Jews from America would have been in the sixteenth century an event worthy of the chronicler's notice. The inference can rightly be drawn, also, that there was a considerable number of Jews in the French colony and possibly a few in Mobile. However, a careful scrutiny of all the

¹ Gayarre's "History of Louisiana in French Domintion," New Orleans, 1885, Appendix.

² Hamilton, "Colonial Mobile," Boston and New York, 1898, p. 362.

List
P. Lee Phillips
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names mentioned by Gayarre and Hamilton, the authorities on colonial Gulf history, has not revealed any name of a Jewish character in the period of French control of lower Alabama.

In the British epoch of Mobile's colonial history, which extended from 1763 to 1780, an interesting reference to a Jew is citable.³ Major Robert Farmer, the British commandant of Mobile, was accused, among other charges, of selling flour belonging to the King to New Orleans, or selling or attempting to sell it there by means of "Pallachio, a Jew." The Major was afterwards acquitted of the charges.

In Hamilton's "Colonial Mobile" a certain François Simon is mentioned in a law suit as companion of a certain François Robert, who in 1766 was advanced goods by Thomas Durnford, of New Orleans, but "who left the country and went to trade among the Indians."⁴ The name Simon is Jewish, and the particular Simon may have been a Jew, because in the eighteenth century many Jews were trappers and traders in the country west of the Appalachian ranges. The matter could not be traced further.

In the British epoch of Mobile history there occurs the first indisputable reference to probably the first Jewish merchants in Mobile.⁵ The document in which the reference occurs is dated August 10th, 1777. It is an original sealed deed-poll on genuine parchment, by Arthur Strother, one of the Masters in Chancery of West Florida. In it he conveys to Daniel Ward, Esq., the plantations of Lis Loy, Goose Island, near Mobile. The instrument gives the history of the property from French through English times. It was originally held by the Chevalier de Montaut de Montberault, who obtained it from the Governor Kerlerec. He, with one Fontenot, sold it on July 9th to Samuel Israel, Alexander Solomons and Joseph

³ Douglas Brymer, "Report on Canadian Archives," Ottawa, 1888, cited by Hamilton, "Colonial Mobile," pp. 196 and 202.

⁴ Hamilton, "Colonial Mobile," p. 203.

⁵ *Mobile Probate Court Records*, cited and discussed also by Hamilton, "Colonial Mobile," p. 235.

Depalacios, "merchants and co-partners at Mobile." They were indebted to a merchant in Pensacola, by name Thompson, and mortgaged to him the Lis Loy plantation. The debt was not paid and, by the terms of a bill of foreclosure, the property was sold to the above mentioned Daniel Ward. There is not the slightest doubt that the defendants were Jewish merchants.

The records of the Spanish period of Mobile colonial history, which extended from 1781 to 1813, do not reveal any references to Jews. If there were any here during this epoch, they have left no positive traces.

The American period of Mobile history began in 1813. The chief sources for the early decades of the federal history are the files of the newspapers dating from 1821, and the records of deeds, marriages, wills and divorces. An examination of these sources revealed the names of many Jews who settled or stopped in Mobile during the early part of the nineteenth century. Many of these became later identified with the Jewish congregation, but, as has been true of the beginnings of Jewish communities the world over, many Jews drifted away from Jewish associations or intermarried from necessity. Some of these became the ancestors of prominent Christian families in Mobile and the South.

In the earliest files of the *Register* the names of Jews are frequently found. A Mr. H. P. Fleischman was secretary of the Mobile Masonic Lodge in 1821.⁶ Solomon H. Davy⁷ (probably misspelled for David) and a Mr. Jacobs⁸ are referred to in a list of uncalled-for letters at the Post Office. One of the earliest schools in Alabama was conducted by a Jewish teacher, a Mr. Judah, who was doubtless a Sephardic Jew.⁹ The name of Simon David is included in the list of

⁶ *Mobile Commercial Register*, December 31, 1821.

⁷ *Ibid.*, December 31, 1821.

⁸ *Ibid.*, July 8, 1822.

⁹ *Ibid.*, October 3, 1822.

delinquents in 1823.¹⁰ In 1823 an English Jew by name of George Davis advertised frequently in the local press. It seems that he had moved to Mobile from Tuscaloosa, for he wished to exchange suitable property in the latter town for property in Mobile.¹¹ In 1824 he became a resident of Mobile and lived here until his death in 1850 at the age of seventy. His tombstone is found in the old Jewish cemetery of Mobile.¹² He engaged in various kinds of business and was the first auctioneer in Mobile.¹³ His son was also engaged in business in Mobile in the 20's and 30's, and in 1837 was married to Roseanna Dunn.¹⁴ The wife of George Davis, Rosetta Davis, who was born in London, is also buried in the old Jewish graveyard. A Mr. Abraham Zuba is mentioned in the files of 1824 of the *Mobile Register*.¹⁵ In 1824 there settled in Mobile a Jewish physician by name of Dr. Solomon Mordecai, who became a leader in his profession and a popular character.¹⁶ He did not affiliate religiously or socially with the Jews, but his Jewish antecedents were never denied. He conducted a successful practice till late in the 50's. His family, who are all Christians, are still living in Mobile. Two brothers, Isaac and Henry Lazarus, conducted business in Mobile as early as 1827. They were Sephardic Jews from Philadelphia, where they returned in later years and ended their days. From a deed in the Probate Court it appears that they bought and sold real estate in Mobile, either directly or by agent, to John Moss, who was a leading shipowner of Philadelphia, early in the nineteenth century.¹⁷

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, September 18, 1823.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, November 1, 1823.

¹² Vide, List of names and inscriptions in old Jewish burial ground, prepared by Alfred G. Moses in MS. form.

¹³ *Mobile Commercial Register*, November 30, 1824 and December 12, 1827.

¹⁴ Marriage records, Mobile county, in Probate Court room.

¹⁵ *Mobile Commercial Register*, October 3, 1824.

¹⁶ *Mobile Commercial Register*, March 3, 1824.

¹⁷ Marken's "Hebrews in America," 1888, New York City, p. 75.

The marriage records of Mobile contain frequent references to Jews before the year 1841, when the congregation was organized. A James B. Marks was married in 1830; Cuffman Oppenheimer in 1831; George Davis, Jr., in 1837; Isaac B. Davis, Mungo H. Goldsmith and Philip Goldsmith in 1841. All of them intermarried with Christians.¹⁸ The first strictly Jewish marriage in Mobile was solemnized in 1847 between Henry Frohlichstein and Sarah Leib.¹⁹

The deeds of sales of conveyance of property issued in the 20's, 30's and 40's in the names of Jews are too numerous to be mentioned. The oldest bears the name of Isaac Lazarus, Grantor, in 1820.²⁰ C. L. Andrews, Solomon Andrews, Isaac Davis, George Davis, Isaac Isaacs, Solomon Jones, Henry Lazarus, Isaac Lyon, Dr. S. Mordecai, Benjamin Newhouse and Simon Oppenheimers are names frequently occurring. Early in the 30's the Andrews brothers, E. L., J. I. and Solomon, occupied a prominent place in the commercial world. There are more than forty deeds recorded in the name of the first mentioned. Success seems to have attended them throughout the 30's, but in the early and late 40's they met with reverses, and from humiliation, E. L. and Solomon Andrews committed suicide in a tragical manner by pre-arrangement, one in New Orleans and one in Mobile, at exactly the same time. The Solomon brothers were prominent in the late 30's. In 1841 Mr. E. Solomon was a member of a committee appointed by the Whig party to notify the candidates of their nomination.²¹ The Jones brothers, Isaac S. and Solomon, who in later years became the leaders in Jewish affairs, settled in Mobile not later than 1831 from England.²² In 1841 a Mr. B. J. Newhouse conducted what

¹⁸ *Marriage Records of Mobile County*, alphabetically indexed.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Probate Court Records*, D. 38.

²¹ *Mobile Commercial Register*, June 16, 1841.

²² *Probate Court Records*, F. 468.

was ostentatiously advertised as a "Music Saloon" on Water Street.

In 1834 there came to Mobile a Jew who was to hold higher honors in his adopted State than any other of his people.²³ Philip Philipps was born in Charleston, S. C., in 1807, of German Jewish parents. He read law under the famous John Gadsden and was admitted to the bar at the age of twenty-two. His legal and political talent was soon shown, for he was the youngest member of the famous nullification convention of 1834. In the same year he was elected to the Legislature, but resigned and settled in Mobile. Here he came at once to the front as a lawyer, and in 1844 was elected to the Legislature. In the following year he composed his famous digest of the decisions of the Supreme Court. In 1846 he was elected to the first judgeship of the newly formed Criminal Court, but declined the honor. In 1851 he was again returned to the Legislature, and in 1853 achieved a notable triumph over the Hon. Elihu Lockwood in the race for Congress. After serving in Congress, where he made a national reputation, he remained in Washington to practice law. Through his efforts the Court of Claims was established in 1859. Although opposed to secession, Mr. Philipps and his family were compelled to go within the Confederate lines in 1861. While in New Orleans, Mrs. Philipps was imprisoned for three months by General Butler for an alleged insult at the passing of the funeral of a Federal officer. After her release she was received as a heroine. After the war Mr. Philipps returned to Washington, where he wrote a work on "Statutory Jurisdiction and Practice" of the United States Supreme Court. He died there, honored for his erudition and character.²⁴

The gradual increase of the Jewish population of Mobile

²³ Brewer, "Alabama; Its History, Resources, etc.," Montgomery, 1872, p. 406.

²⁴ From personal recollections of many Mobilians.

during the early 40's led to the organization of a Jewish congregation. The first notice of it is in a deed recorded in the Probate Court, in which the Congregation "Shaarai Shomayim" purchased from the city four lots for burial purposes. The deed is dated June 22nd, 1841.²⁵ Religious services were held first at the residence of a Mr. B. L. Tim. Not until June 25th, 1844, was the congregation duly incorporated.²⁶ It was called "Shaarai Shomayim," or "the Congregation of the Gates of Heaven" and "Friends of the the Needy." The first president was Mr. I. I. Jones, who held the position for more than thirty years, and came to occupy a prominent place in Jewish and general affairs. He was a man of mental and moral superiority, and exerted a strong influence for good upon the Jewish community of Mobile for three decades. He was a member of the City Council and the first promoter of a street railway in Mobile. His youngest daughter became the wife of the well-known Rabbi James K. Gutheim, of New Orleans.

No regular rabbi was employed at first, services being read by laymen. The first synagogue was the Turner Verein Hall on St. Emanuel Street. The structure is no longer in existence. It was dedicated on December 27th, 1846. The first rabbi was the Reverend Mendez da Silva, who served until 1848. Unfortunately, the congregation records till 1876 have been lost, and a consecutive history had to be gathered from personal reminiscences and a few newspaper records. The data being fragmentary, a complete history of the growth and progress of the congregation cannot be presented. The portion which begins with the early 60's is easier to compile, for many persons are living who have a clear and connected knowledge of those years.

As has been stated, provision was made for burial purposes as early as 1841. Michael Lyons was the first Jew buried in this old graveyard, abandoned in 1878, when it was completely

²⁵ *Probate Court Records.*

²⁶ *Probate Court Records*, 10, 296-7.

filled with graves, close to one another.²⁷ The frequency of tombs bearing the dates of 1853, 1857 and 1870 are melancholy reminders of the yellow fever plagues of those years which decimated the Southern communities. In the center of the plot, an imposing monument is erected over the remains of Rabbi Abraham Laser, who died in 1870 of yellow fever, which he contracted while attending the sick and the dying.

The following facts about the early Jews of Mobile are of interest and value: The first long-distance conveyance in Mobile was conducted by the Heller brothers. Mr. Abraham Newburger and Prof. Joseph Bloch were among the first teachers of music in Alabama. They later conducted the first music store in the State. A Mr. Solomon was the pioneer optician of Alabama.

The Rev. Mendes da Silva was succeeded by Mr. Baruch M. Emanuel, who acted as schochet and chasan of the community from 1848 to 1853. In the meantime the Jewish community had grown so large that the old synagogue was found inadequate. With his usual progressiveness, Mr. I. I. Jones purchased from the Mobile Musical Association its hall, located on the present site of the synagogue. The building was altered and dedicated on March 11th, 1853, by Rabbi Julius Eckman, who was the successor of Mr. Emanuel. I have learned that Mr. Eckman was a rabbi of thorough Hebrew and general education. He remained only a year in Mobile and then went to California. It would be interesting to reproduce in full the comments passed by the *Mobile Register* of that date upon the dedication exercises if the limits of this sketch did not forbid.²⁸ This excerpt reflects the journalistic attitude of the early day towards the Jew: "The synagogue is worthy in all respects the high character of our Jewish brethren for wealth, intelligence and character. How proud must the enfranchised descendants of the patriarchs have felt yesterday who were

²⁷ List of Names and Inscriptions of old Mobile burial ground prepared in MSS. by Alfred G. Moses.

²⁸ *Mobile Commercial Register*, November 12, 1853.

some time since the slaves and serfs of Russia, Austria and Prussia. Poor Poland.”

The correct facts in the history of the congregation from 1853 to 1865 are hard to ascertain. There are many conflicting impressions of this period. The succession of rabbis is hard to determine. According to one old resident the congregation was presided over for several years by a Mr. J. Epstein, who also officiated for a while for a second congregation which seceded from the mother body. Still another person claims that the Mr. Emanuel who had served before Rabbi Eckman also officiated during the 50's. In a Mobile history, however, I find the name of Rev. Dr. Schatz, M. D., as the officiating rabbi who had been entirely forgotten by the survivors of the 50's. I hope, by further inquiries, to disentangle this historical difficulty.

There is also much conflicting testimony regarding both the date of the fire which destroyed the entire building either in 1855 or 1856; and date of its re-dedication by Rabbi Gutheim, of New Orleans. Who was rabbi then is still a disputed question.

In the 50's the Jewish community received its largest accessions. Most of the Jewish families of Mobile to-day are descendants of the Jewish settlers of the 50's. The city directory of 1855 gives the names of more than fifty places of business conducted by Jews. The community numbered probably seventy-five families.

At the time of the Civil War the Mr. Epstein above mentioned was the rabbi. When war was declared, the community furnished its quota of soldiers to the Southern cause. The Twelfth Alabama contained no less than fifteen Jewish soldiers from Mobile.^{22a} The most prominent among them was

^{22a} The names of the Jews enlisted in the Independent Rifles of the Twelfth Alabama Regiment, organized at Mobile in 1861, are L. Newman, second sergeant; A. Proskauer, corporal; F. Neubrik, S. Pickard, J. Sonnentheil, S. Rosdwald, A. Einstein, S. Stein, W. H. Rochotsh, S. Haas, L. Siegel, H. Ash and S. Altman, privates.

Adolph Proskauer, who enlisted as a corporal and rose to the rank of major. He fought at the battles of Seven Pines, South Mountain, Sharpsburg, Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. During several engagements he was desperately wounded. He was known for his intrepidity, and the following tribute was paid him by a Christian comrade in arms: "I remember him as a brave soldier and a courtly and gallant gentleman. I can see him now as he nobly carried himself at Gettysburg, standing cool and calm with cigar in his mouth at the head of the Twelfth Alabama amid a perfect rain of bullets. He was the personification of courage and gallantry."²⁹ After the war Major Proskauer returned to Mobile where he became the leader of Jewish affairs until his departure in 1893. He stood so high in Mobile that he was twice elected during the critical Reconstruction days as a member of the Legislature, in 1869 and 1870, where he rendered yeoman service for reconstruction. Among the Jewish contingent was Mr. Nathan Strauss, who rose to the rank of captain. He too returned to Mobile after the war and became prominent in Jewish affairs. In 1870 he was elected a member of the Legislature. Many others whose names cannot be mentioned in this brief sketch fought bravely on the Southern side, and many Jewish women rendered incalculable service to the Southern soldiers in the homes and hospitals of Mobile.

During the war the normal activities of the congregation and community were interrupted. Many families left for New Orleans. After the war, the community received new accessions and the congregation grew in numbers and influence. Among the many changes and reforms must be mentioned the opening of a Hebrew and secular school by the congregation in 1868. In this school a primary and secondary education was given, in connection with Hebrew studies. Rabbi L. Wintner, now a rabbi in Brooklyn, was made rabbi

²⁹ Extract from letter by Capt. A. E. Park of Georgia at death of Major Proskauer.

of the congregation and superintendent of the school. The institution was maintained till the late 70's, when the secular features were gradually abolished. Rabbi Wintner was succeeded by Rabbi Maurice Fluegel, who acted as rabbi, and by Rabbi Abraham Laser, who acted as chasan. On the departure of the former, the latter was elected as rabbi. He served until his untimely death during the yellow fever visitation of 1870. He was succeeded by a certain Abraham Yaeger, who created a sensation in the second year of his rabbinate by suddenly professing Christianity. His position was declared vacant, and Yaeger went to Chicago, where he wrote a controversial book in defence of his change of heart, entitled "Mind and Heart: An Exposition of Judaism and Christianity." It is a curious piece of polemic religious literature. Yeager attempts to give a philosophical reason for his conversion by the usual Christological argument.

The vacancy created by his unusual conduct was filled by the election of Rabbi Adolph Moses, who was called from his Montgomery charge. Educated in the Jewish seminary and the University of Breslau, he added to a profound Jewish and general scholarship, a cosmopolitan experience gained as a soldier in the Polish and Italian Wars of Independence. During his long incumbency he left a deep impression upon the community and acquired a reputation as a Jewish novelist and a Biblical scholar. From Mobile he was called to the Louisville Congregation, where he served until the time of his death.

He was succeeded by Rabbi Emanuel Schreiber, who, after two years' service, was followed by Rev. Dr. Henry Berkowitz, of Philadelphia. He served five years faithfully and became a factor in the religious and public life of Mobile. His successor was Rabbi Oscar J. Cohen, a prominent graduate of Columbia, who officiated for ten years and during his incumbency made a profound impression upon Mobile Judaism. He left because of ill health and died in 1901 in Dallas. His successor was Rabbi Tobias Schanfarber, who occupies a

prominent pulpit in Chicago. The present incumbent is the writer of this sketch.

The limits of this paper prevent a special mention of all Israelites who have held prominent civic and political positions in Mobile and who have been identified with the leading movements and best institutions. Mr. William Leinkauf was for years the president of the School Board. The Mobile Jewish community as it is at present constituted is the result of the growth of six decades of a conservative and yet truly American Jewish element and illustrates well the force of tradition and history in an American Jewish environment. The historic influence and progress, the writer trusts, he has shown with accuracy and clearness.

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